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Managing Wool

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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Recommended Citation

South Dakota State University, Cooperative Extension, "Managing Wool" (1984). *SDSU Extension Fact Sheets*. 991.

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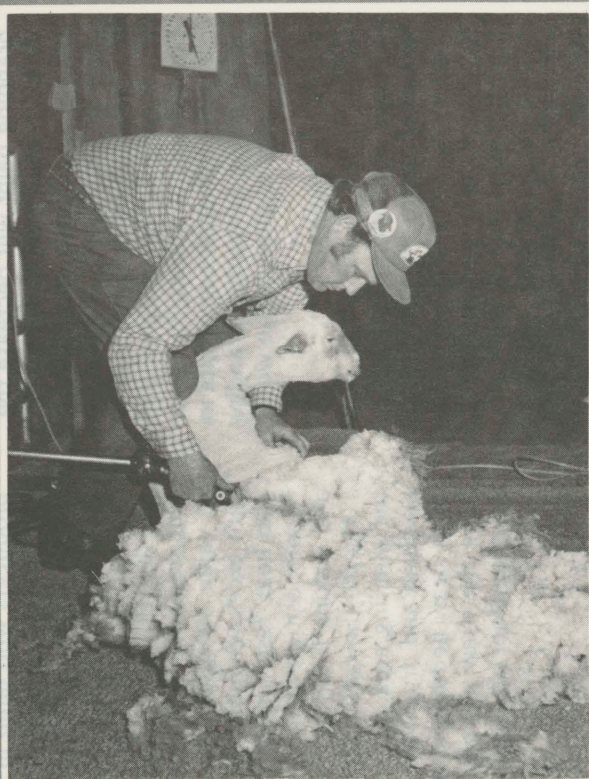
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MANAGING WOOL



Cooperative Extension Service
South Dakota State University
U.S. Department of Agriculture

MANAGING WOOL

James M. Thompson
Extension sheep specialist

An easy way to lose 15 to 35% of the total gross income from your sheep enterprise is to mismanage the wool crop.

Sheep grow their wool the year round. Consequently, wool must also be managed year-round, not just at shearing time, if you want the highest returns when the fleece is marketed.

At market, the value of wool is determined by several factors. Some of these (wool grade, fleece weight, and uniformity of the fleece) are determined by genetics, and you can upgrade them by careful selection and breeding.

Other factors which determine price are related to management and environment; here is a sure way for you to influence the price you receive. Mismanagement will bring the price down as surely as careful supervision of the flock will bring it up.

If sheep are to produce wool up to their genetic capacity, nutrition is a first consideration. Because wool is primarily protein, rations must contain adequate protein levels, especially during the winter months, along with adequate energy and mineral levels. Under most conditions, rations balanced to meet the ewes' needs for maintenance gestation and lactation are sufficient to provide maximum wool production.

And here is another way to influence price. Keeping wool clean and free of contamination, whether vegetable matter or other foreign material, increases yield. Higher yields mean lower conversion costs for the woolen mills and a higher value for the wool. Year-round control of wool contamination is the key.

Vegetable matter

Burs, grass seeds, awns, chaff, hay, or straw in the wool will decrease its value. Burs and similar materials cannot be removed from the wool through normal scouring procedures; the woolen mills have additional costs, and the producer gets less money for his product.

Avoid grazing any pasture or range that is dominated by plants that contaminate wool. Mow the plants off or treat them with a good weed control program. If you must graze such areas, remove the sheep when the seeds of these plants mature.

At feeding time, avoid spilling or pitching feed over the backs of the sheep or on their heads. With properly designed feeders, vegetable matter contamination can be kept to a minimum. Plans for such feeders are available through your county Extension office.

Branding paint

Branding paint also decreases the value of your wool. The best advice is to not use it.

But if branding paint must be used, choose a scourable paint that is manufactured for this purpose. Do not use house or barn paint to brand sheep; these are non-scourable.

Don't dilute or mix scourable paints with diesel fuel, gasoline, or linseed oil. An excessive amount of even scourable branding paint will decrease the value of your wool, so use it sparingly. It is also important to clean the equipment (such as numbers and letters) that you use in applying the branding paint. Equipment not thoroughly cleaned after each use results in an excessive amount of branding paint being applied to the wool.

Synthetic twine

Plastic and nylon twine is a serious threat to the U.S. sheep industry. It is virtually impossible to remove these contaminants from the wool during the

manufacturing process. Some manufacturers are threatening to discontinue buying domestic wool if the problem is not resolved.

Every producer needs to be vigilant. Whenever possible, keep synthetic twines off your farm or ranch. Keep them away from your sheep. It doesn't matter what color the twines are; they decrease your profits once they work into a sheep's wool.

Hay bales tied with synthetic twine should not be ground until the twine is removed. Pick up the twine once it has served its use. These twines are not biodegradable, so they must be burned or buried. Don't use them to tie up gates in areas where you keep your sheep.

Shearing management

Shearing time is harvest time. Handle your wool crop as carefully as you plan to handle your profits, and you will have more profits to handle.

Now is not the time to slack off on keeping the wool clean and free of contamination. Have the shearing area well lighted. Keep the shearing floor or area dry and clean. Put brooms handy, and use them regularly.

Hire competent shearers. It is their responsibility to remove the fleece in one piece with a minimum amount of second cuts. Excessive second cuts result in a decrease in value of your wool.

Generally, sheep should be sheared prior to lambing, but this doesn't always work for some producers who lamb in January and February and lack sufficient shelter for the sheep after they are sheared.

Shear only dry sheep. Damp or wet fleeces mildew when sacked. This stains the wool and lowers its value. Wool that is sacked with excessive moisture levels will also heat, resulting in an actual decomposition of the wool fiber and making it virtually worthless.

Locate the catch pens close to the shearing area. They need to be clean and dry. Don't spread fresh straw bedding in the catch pens; the straw will get onto the shearing floor and into the wool.

After shearing, tie the fleece with the flesh side out, with the shoulder wool exposed. Use only paper twine, and not an excessive amount. Never tie fleeces with plastic, sisal, or jute twines.

Gather any tags, dung locks, stained wool, and floor sweepings and sack them separately.

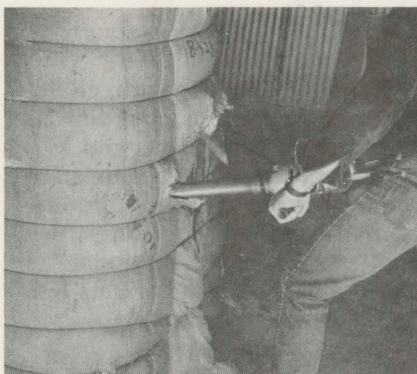
When the tied fleece leaves the shearing floor, it should be sacked in only burlap wool sacks to prevent further contamination. Once a bag is sufficiently filled, tie off the ends with cotton string. Number and mark each sack for contents. Do not use paint to mark.

If you have flocks of mixed breeding, it is sound management to divide them into groups of white faced, black faced, and crosses so that they can be sheared separately. Wool that is free of black fibers has a higher value.

Shear the white-faced sheep first and sack this wool separately. Then bring the black faced sheep onto the floor. This will prevent contamination of the shearing floor with black fiber.

Marketing

Where and how you sell your wool obviously will affect your profit. Wool in South Dakota may be sold through a cooperative or to a private buyer. Wool cooperatives serve as a marketing agent and sell you wool at the



If you are marketing enough wool to make a core test feasible, it measures fineness and percent clean fiber; if your fleece is high quality you are not penalized by "averages."

optimum time based on their expert judgment.

Keep in mind, wherever you sell, that a buyer who gives one price for all wool is operating on averages, penalizing good wool and subsidizing poor wool.

You may want to consider selling your wool on a grade and yield basis or on a core test. Selling on a core basis requires a substantial quantity of wool to make the cost of the test feasible, so it is not suited to producers with smaller flocks.

The core test provides information on the fineness (grade) and yield (percent clean fiber). It insures that you get paid for the grade and type of wool you have produced.

No matter the method you use to market wool, make sure you receive the proper receipts indicating the pounds of wool sold and the price per pound. These receipts are necessary because the final step in marketing is applying for wool incentive payments at your local county ASCS office.

The wool incentive program is financed by tariffs on wool and wool products imported into the U.S. The incentive payment you will receive is based on the price you got for your wool in comparison to the U.S. average wool price for that year. The more you receive for your wool, the higher your incentive payment.

To wrap it up and tie it off...

Remember that "wool that is clean earns more green." You get clean wool by managing for it throughout the year **and** at shearing time. Then you get a higher profit for your sheep enterprise.

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